Marshall Memo 959

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 31, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Growing up, I never liked poetry. I shuddered each time I heard the word in school. *Poetry* meant finding the hidden meanings the poet has worked so meticulously to hide from his reader. Every word was a symbol for something deep and mysterious and our task was to unravel all the tricky nuances."

Linda Rief (see item #4)

"Western educational systems tend to prize reading and writing highly and often show little patience for cognitive exploration – a combination almost guaranteed to sap the confidence of dyslexic kids."

Justin Garson (see item #2)

"I nipped their smartness in the bud."

Katharine Wright, sister of the famed Wright brothers, a high-school Latin teacher in Dayton, Ohio at the turn of the 20th century, describing how she dealt with boys she judged to be "notoriously bad" (in *The Wright Brothers* by David McCullough, 2015)

"*Heroification* creates larger-than-life, perfect heroes separated from their community context, while *villainification* shifts our perspective away from systemic (or structural) harms to the individual evil-doer."

Cathryn van Kessel (see item #1)

"Good penmanship promotes reading and more-complex writing skills. Familiarity with letters and their formation strengthens our mental model of how words work, which in turn supports our young readers' reading fluency. Strong handwriting skills also free up space for more structured and creative writing pursuits, like organizing ideas and using different literary elements."

Chie Sipin-Bjarenas (see item #5)

"Ultimately the goal of learning is transfer. It's owning your learning and being a learner out in the world without a teacher at your side."

Melanie Meehan (quoted in item #7)

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1. The Problem of Heroes and Villains When Studying History

In this article in *Social Education* , Cathryn van Kessel (Texas Christian University) says there's a tendency to see heroes (Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr.) as amazing figures who shaped history, and villains (Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin) as ogres who single-handedly wrought havoc. The problem, says van Kessel, is that "*heroification* creates larger-than-life, perfect heroes separated from their community context, while *villainification* shifts our perspective away from systemic (or structural) harms to the individual evil-doer. In both cases, complex and enmeshed processes between and among individuals, communities, and broader society are flattened into a focus on one person."

If students' takeaway from history classes is that positive social change happens as a result of heroic individuals, says van Kessel, and evil is the result of a few madmen, they'll miss the social forces behind those heroes and villains and "come to see themselves only as bystanders… Heroification and villainification narratives not only misrepresent historical processes, but they can deflate a sense of personal agency and responsibility… The attitude that making significant social progress is unattainable to ordinary people is inaccurate and can hinder students from seeing their own possibilities as social actors."

Yes, heroic narratives can be inspiring, but idealized individuals like Helen Keller "can actually cause disengagement," says van Kessel. "Students do not consider these to be people like themselves, with flaws and complications… There is a need to emphasize the underlying mundane normalcy of what might be considered heroic." She cites the work of Hannah Arendt on "an innate human capacity to do something new, something unexpected," what Arendt called *action* – for example, the way united resistance in Denmark stymied the Nazis during World War II.

Similarly, villainification can lead to blaming a single evildoer rather than looking at the people, attitudes, and institutions that enable them. This way of thinking is not only incorrect, says van Kessel, but "can thwart attempts to understand the evils of the world, therefore preventing societies from adequately countering those evils." She again cites Arendt, who wrote about the "banality of evil" – the capacity of ordinary individuals to be part of horrific phenomena like genocide, enslavement, and trafficking.

"As educators," she continues, "it is important to know that it is psychologically comforting for us and our students to fetishize evil in a singular villain in lieu of a more-nuanced analysis." There will always be tension between our love of heroic and villainous stories and the difficult work of understanding the deeper and more-complicated historical forces at work. Van Kessel's suggestions for social studies educators:

• *Discuss good and evil thoughtfully*. It's important to use clear, active-voice language to describe the involvement of ordinary people in historical events. For example, rather than saying, "Jews, gays, the Roma, and others were forced into camps," say, "Nazi officials as well as local collaborators forced Jews, gays, Roma people, and others into transports to concentration and death camps." In describing heroes, give context – for example, "Rosa Parks was a seamstress, a member of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, and trained in civil disobedience."

• *Use "throughline" inquiry questions*. These have the following qualities: (a) clear connections to the issue; (b) can't be answered by a Yes or No; (c) are interesting and engaging; and (d) contain an unavoidable ethical dimension. For example, in a unit on globalization, a throughline question might be: *What similarities and differences exist between the colonial exploitation of the past and globalization in the present, and what part do I play in these processes?*

• *Discuss human capacities for good and evil*. Passages from Hannah Arendt and other writers can help students understand how ordinary people can be part of positive change – or complicit in bad outcomes.

• *Make heroes or villains more ordinary*. Show photos of these people talking on the phone and engaging in other everyday activities. Another way to complicate the good-versus-evil dichotomy is giving the back story of fictional characters like Darth Vader in *Star Wars* or Voldemort in *Harry Potter*. Ask students how these characters could have been good or evil – or something in between.

• *Analyze textbooks and other resources*. Students might read a passage and critique it from a de-heroification or anti-villainization perspective, addressing questions like these (quoted verbatim):

- Who is considered responsible for the achievement or the harm inflicted?
- Is the sentence in the active or passive voice?
- Are individuals, groups, or communities named? Is there a sense of nuance within any of the groups discussed?
- Are similar processes in contemporary society discussed or implied?
- Is there a sense that the harm or achievement is committed by an individual or due to broader policy? Are ordinary people "like us" implicated?
- What images accompany these descriptions? What might these images convey to the reader?
- Are readers asked to consider only simplistic facts or is there an invitation to engage in self-reflection?

Questions like these can also be used in connection with field trips, museum displays, films, and television dramas.

Van Kessel concludes by urging teachers to consider how "daily classroom practices can encourage (or discourage) *action*, such as seeing authority figures and governments as capable of mistakes, discussing reasons for rules and regulations (and, in some cases, exposing related injustice), and providing opportunities for students to disagree with each other and their teacher. Both good and evil occur because of ordinary humans. Thus, part of education (as opposed to mere schooling) is to provide students with opportunities to see their own capacities for good and evil."

"Deindividualizing Evil and Good in Social Education" by Cathryn van Kessel in *Social Education*, October 2022 (Vol. 86, #5, pp. 347-354); van Kessel can be reached at c.vankessel@tcu.edu.

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2. An Evolutionary Perspective on Dyslexia

In this article in *Psychology Today*, Justin Garson (Hunter College, CUNY) says that since dyslexia was first identified in the 1880s, most researchers have focused on its negative aspects – slow word recognition, inaccurate spelling, reading and writing less adeptly than one's peers. But he notes that in a recent *Frontiers in Psychology* paper, Helen Taylor and Martin David Vestergaard argue that dyslexia is a cognitive specialization that evolved to help early humans survive – and plays an important role today.

Taylor and Vestergaard build their theory on three pieces of evidence. First, dyslexia has a strong genetic component. Second, it is present in all human populations, suggesting it has been present through human history. And third, dyslexia is still widespread (between 5 and 20 percent of human populations), unlike serious childhood diseases that are reduced or extinguished by natural selection. Conclusion: dyslexia has been making a positive evolutionary contribution. How? Researchers noted several cognitive strengths of people with dyslexia through time:

- A big-picture perspective versus getting lost in details;
- Creativity and divergent thinking, identifying multiple solutions to a problem;
- An aptitude for art, architecture, and engineering.

The evolutionary theory: in an ancient human group, these traits would help it survive and thrive, especially in adverse conditions that required non-obvious solutions.

Taylor and Vestergaard posit a continuum of human cognition from *exploration* to *exploitation*: freely exploring a new environment is at one end, taking full advantage of its resources at the other. People with dyslexia are at the *exploration* end of the spectrum, doing better at holistic visual processing and insight-based reasoning than neurotypical peers. This would benefit a human group moving to a new place or dealing with changing conditions, traits that would complement those of group members naturally stronger at analyzing, building on, and perfecting what's been discovered.

"Western educational systems," says Garson, "tend to prize reading and writing highly and often show little patience for cognitive exploration – a combination almost guaranteed to sap the confidence of dyslexic kids. The resulting disengagement can come with lasting consequences; adults with dyslexia are more likely than others to self-harm or end up imprisoned."

The clear implication: educators and families should help individuals with dyslexia become more adept at reading and writing while recognizing their cognitive strengths – what their brains are wired to do better – and guide them toward academic programs and careers where those strengths can help them thrive as individuals and contribute to our survival and success as a species.

"Dyslexia: Beyond a Disorder" by Justin Garson in *Psychology Today*, November/December 2022 (Vol. 55, #6, pp. 26-27); Garson can be reached at jgarson@hunter.cuny.edu. The full article by Helen Taylor and Martin David Vestergaard is "Developmental Dyslexia: Disorder or Specialization in Exploration."

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3. Real-Time, High-Tech Peer Feedback for Student Presenters

In this *Edutopia* article, Darcy Bakkegard (Educators' Lab) says that as an English and theatre teacher, she found it difficult to keep a class engaged while one student after another gave end-of-unit speeches at the front of the room – "Eight minutes of summative assessment drowning in a sea of apathy," says Bakkegard. When she tried having students give in-person feedback after presentations, the comments were often trite and less-than-candid. Having classes fill out a feedback form or rubric created a lot of paperwork for her and didn't seem to build students' listening or presentation skills.

Then Bakkegard came up with a better idea: using the free app Socrative to allow real-time feedback for each student after their presentation or speech. This turned "a week of zoned-out audience members into a week of engaging simultaneous formative and summative assessments." She created a simple quiz for peer feedback, with students rating speakers on a five-point scale:

- Awesome! So clear
- Pretty good
- OK, can be better
- Not clear
- Confusing/missing

There are 24 assessment criteria, with open responses interspersed with multiple-choice items. Here are some of them:

- Attention grabber
- Thesis
- Topic sentence
- Evidence: clear, specific, well-quoted
- Eye contact

- Stance and volume
- Conclusion: restatement of thesis and review of points
- Tone, persuasiveness
- General comments

Bakkegard describes step by step how she implemented this idea in her classroom:

- Creating the Socrative quiz with detailed expectations for student speeches.
- The day before presentations begin, she reviews the criteria with each class.
- Student open Socrative on their laptops (students presenting that day are excused from rating other speeches so they can focus on their own).
- Bakkegard saves the first quiz with the student presenter's name and launches it so the class can give ratings and comments, and the first speaker begins.
- Using the Socrative teacher dashboard, Bakkegard can see if a student is mindlessly rushing through ratings. "I simply asked that reviewer to please pick my next Lotto numbers," she says; "clearly, they could see the future, since they knew how the speaker was going to do before even finishing their speech."
- When each presenter is finished, Bakkegard compares the class's ratings with her own and guides a brief discussion highlighting that student's strengths, examples of effective aspects, and areas for improvement.
- Bakkegard saves that quiz and creates a new one for the next speaker, and the process repeats.
- Students who present first are given "benefit of the doubt" points because they can't benefit from the ratings and suggestions offered to subsequent speakers.

Bakkegard reports that this process was very successful, with students "far more engaged during presentations" and each presenter getting immediate, detailed feedback.

"Using Tech to Encourage Peer Feedback During Presentations" by Darcy Bakkegard in *Edutopia*, October 20, 2022; Bakkegard invites readers to use her Socrative quiz code: SOC-68520018.

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4. Learning to Love Poetry in Middle School

"Growing up, I never liked poetry," says Linda Rief (University of New Hampshire Summer Literacy Institute) in this *MiddleWeb* article. "I shuddered each time I heard the word in school. *Poetry* meant finding the hidden meanings the poet has worked so meticulously to hide from his reader." Studying poems made Rief feel stupid and she avoided it, believing it was for the smart kids.

Decades later, as an eighth-grade teacher, Rief happened to hear William Stafford read his poetry aloud. "I don't remember a single poem," she says. "I just remember his voice, his words, hanging in the air, waiting for me to grab them, to make them mine. I was astonished."

The next day she asked her students if they had any favorite poets. Their reactions mirrored her own as a student, recoiling at the idea of another poetry unit being inflicted on them. *Quizzes and tests. Count the syllables. Name the kind of poem it is. Identify the rhyme*

scheme. Define meter. Write a sonnet. Search for symbolism. Memorize and present a Robert Frost poem.

Rief understood her students' resistance and was determined to give them a different experience, something that would help them appreciate the value of "brevity and intentionality… to recognize and relish the language," to enjoy and appreciate this literary genre. That meant avoiding the mistakes previous teachers had made, "schoolifying" poetry by using it to teach figurative language and analytical skills and dragging students through poems those teachers loved.

Rief started by having students keep "heart books" of poetry. Each got a blank notebook, decorated the cover with their heart map (items of emotional appeal), and in their spare time copied on double-page spreads poems of their choice, those "that tugged at their heart and mind." Throughout the year, Rief recommended poets, taught artistic techniques, and made poetry collections and art supplies available. "The poems they found," she says, "gave them pause for thinking even more seriously about themselves and others."

Rief stocked her classroom with works by poets whose backgrounds were similar to her students, and also those from different backgrounds "so they can see how the world might be different from their own lives" – contemporary and classic, from different countries and cultures, lots of choices. She prodded students with questions:

- What came to mind as you read this poem?
- What did the poem make you think or feel?
- What in the poem made you think or feel that way?
- What did you notice about the way the poem was written?
- What did the poet do that you might try in your own writing?

Rief also had students do quickwrites – short bursts of writing using a mentor text (a powerful excerpt from a poem, essay, or novel) as a doorway to 3-4 minutes of exploratory personal writing.

Next, Rief asked students to look carefully at their writing and find a particularly effective line, then illustrate it with a drawing, watercolor, torn paper, zentangles, or photograph, and share it with classmates. "The simple act of searching for an indelible line, and perhaps not finding one," says Rief, "leads students to really look at, and pay attention to, their word choices, their phrasing, their intentional shaping of the writing. It frequently leads to revision, often toward more-poetic language that made the reader see and feel something."

One student who said he hated poetry in earlier grades wrote: "Before doing the Heart Books I thought that the only good thing about poetry was that poems were short. Now that we are done, I admit I enjoyed the poems, and though I won't admit it out loud, I think that in high school I'd enjoy taking a course on poetry."

"How Can We Change the Minds of Middle Graders About Poetry?" by Linda Rief "in *MiddleWeb*, October 9, 2022

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5. Is Sixth Grade Too Late for Handwriting Instruction?

In this *Edutopia* article, middle-school teacher Chie Sipin-Bjarenas says that for some time she's been concerned about the quality of students' handwriting. Penmanship is usually seen as the responsibility of early-elementary teachers, but during the pandemic, Sipin-Bjarenas decided to conduct an informal study on cursive writing, "employing a not-so-willing subject: my son."

That's because the boy's handwriting was barely legible (see the sample in the link below), and for years frustrated teachers had difficulty reading his work. Did he have dysgraphia, a learning disability affecting the ability to write? Whatever the reason, Sipin-Bjarenas found cursive writing lessons online and started to teach her son. "I could not believe the difference," she says. "My son was so very proud of his penmanship."

When her school returned to in-person instruction, she became an apostle for cursive, plying her colleagues with research on handwriting:

- It automates letter and word formations, allowing the writer to write more quickly.
- It speeds up the development of reading and writing skills.
- It allows for more-regular submission of work.
- It helps build memory.

Sipin-Bjarenas and her colleagues began weekly 30-minute penmanship lessons accompanied by reminders throughout the week, focusing on:

- Pencil grip and appropriate pressure (not too light, not too firm);
- Holding the paper at an angle with the non-dominant hand;
- Explicit instruction in letter formation;
- Placing letters on the line;
- Even spacing between letters and words.

The results have been promising, and Sipin-Bjarenas believes a key factor is the lightening of students' cognitive load. "Good penmanship promotes reading and more-complex writing skills," she says. "Familiarity with letters and their formation strengthens our mental model of how words work, which in turn supports our young readers' reading fluency. Strong handwriting skills also free up space for more structured and creative writing pursuits, like organizing ideas and using different literary elements."

"Extending Penmanship Lessons Beyond Elementary School" by Chie Sipin-Bjarenas in *Edutopia*, September 23, 2022

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6. Jennifer Gonzalez on Differentiating with "Seminars"

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez joins with Connecticut elementary-school coordinator Melanie Meehan to describe "seminars" – short (7-10-minute), small-group (4-5 students) mini-lessons that students sign up for to discuss a specific topic while the rest of the class is doing independent or group work. The teacher decides on one or two seminars to offer based on observing students as they work or a poll to see which areas they're struggling with.

Meehan says seminars are very helpful in 50-minute writing workshop classes (she says the word seminar is "admittedly fancy" but her kids love it). Here's the sequence:

- A 7-10-minute full-class explanation;
- 20 minutes of independent writing during which she convenes a seminar;
- A 2-3-minute interruption when she shares an observation or teaching point with the whole class;
- Another 20 minutes of independent writing with another pullout seminar.

Having students sign up is important, says Meehan: "Ultimately the goal of learning is transfer. It's owning your learning and being a learner out in the world without a teacher at your side. So I love having kids sign up for their own seminars." But there are times when certain students need to work on a skill or habit and she calls them over.

Once this routine was established in Meehan's classroom, students who had mastered a skill could start conducting seminars themselves. At this point, Meehan became more efficient at managing demands on her time and built more confidence and agency in her students. Gonzalez believes seminars can be used in any subject area and grade; the only prerequisite is at least one independent work period during which students can be convened for a seminar.

"How to Personalize Instruction with Seminars" by Jennifer Gonzalez and Melanie Meehan in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 17, 2022

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7. Recommendations on Grade Retention and Social Promotion

In this position statement from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) in *Communiqué*, Franci Crepeau-Hobson, Mary Ann Rafoth, Michele Milhouse, and Elizabeth Williams summarize the organization's recommendations on grade retention and social promotion. The key points:

• *Research* – There is very little research on social promotion, say the authors, but the consensus from studies on grade retention is that there are a number of downsides. Retention doesn't seem to help academically, and the social-emotional effects are often negative on students' self-concept, self-confidence, academic motivation, behavior, and interpersonal relationships. Recent studies on retention are more methodologically sound, and they continue to give mixed reviews to grade retention; only 24 percent of studies found a significantly positive impact, 41 percent no significant difference, 35 percent a significantly negative effect.

• *Equity concerns* – Research findings are especially troubling on the long-term impact of retention: higher rates of special education placement, absenteeism, suspensions, dropping out, and not engaging in post-secondary education. These effects are more pronounced with students of color, English learners, and students from low-income families.

• *Alternatives* – The NASP paper strongly recommends early diagnosis of problems and immediate intervention that addresses each student's risk factors, including multitiered systems of support (MTSS), individual learning plans, tutoring, counseling, after-school programs, outside-school interventions, and more. The key components (quoted verbatim):

- Equitable learning opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds;

- Universal screening for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional difficulties;
- Culturally relevant and trauma-informed approaches to education that support the development of key academic and social-emotional competencies;
- Multitiered systems of support models with frequent progress monitoring to provide early, intensive, evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains.

If after these interventions grade retention is still the choice, NASP recommends that it should not be a "simple repeat of instruction and content." Retained students should receive "enhanced instruction that accelerates learning in areas in which they lag and challenging curricula in the areas where they are skilled."

"Grade Retention and Social Promotion," a position statement from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) by Franci Crepeau-Hobson, Mary Ann Rafoth, Michele Milhouse, and Elizabeth Williams in *Communiqué*, November 2022 (Vol. 51, #3, pp. 18-19)

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly publication keeps principals, teachers, instructional coaches, superintendents, and other educators well-informed on current K-12 research and ideas. Kim Marshall, drawing on 53 years as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Tuesday (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's also a podcast and HTML version.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
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Education Week
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Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
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Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education